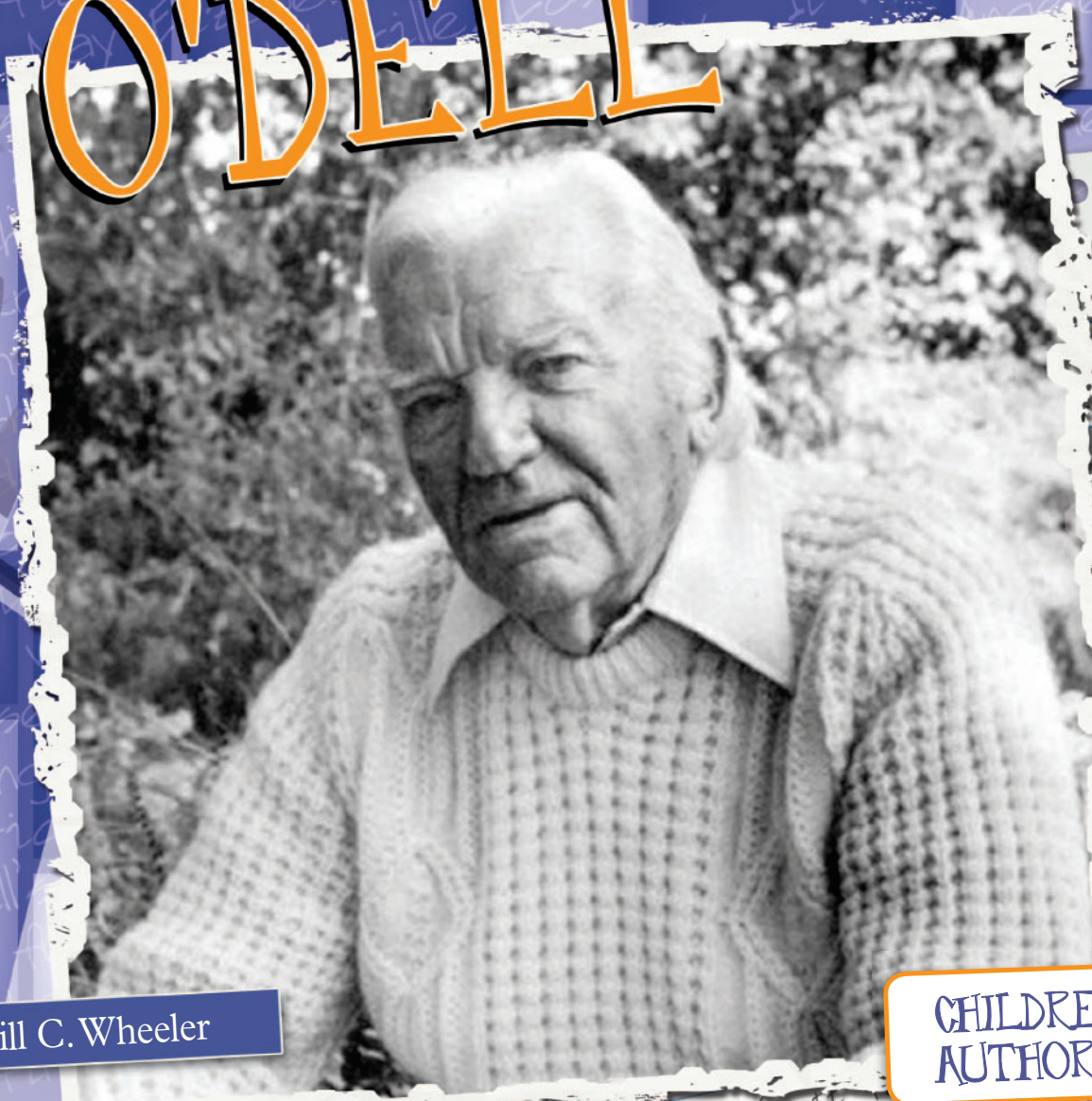
Scott O'Dell



Jill C. Wheeler

CHILDREN'S AUTHORS

Children's Authors

Scott O'Dell

Jill C. Wheeler

Checkerboard Library

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Scott O'Dell

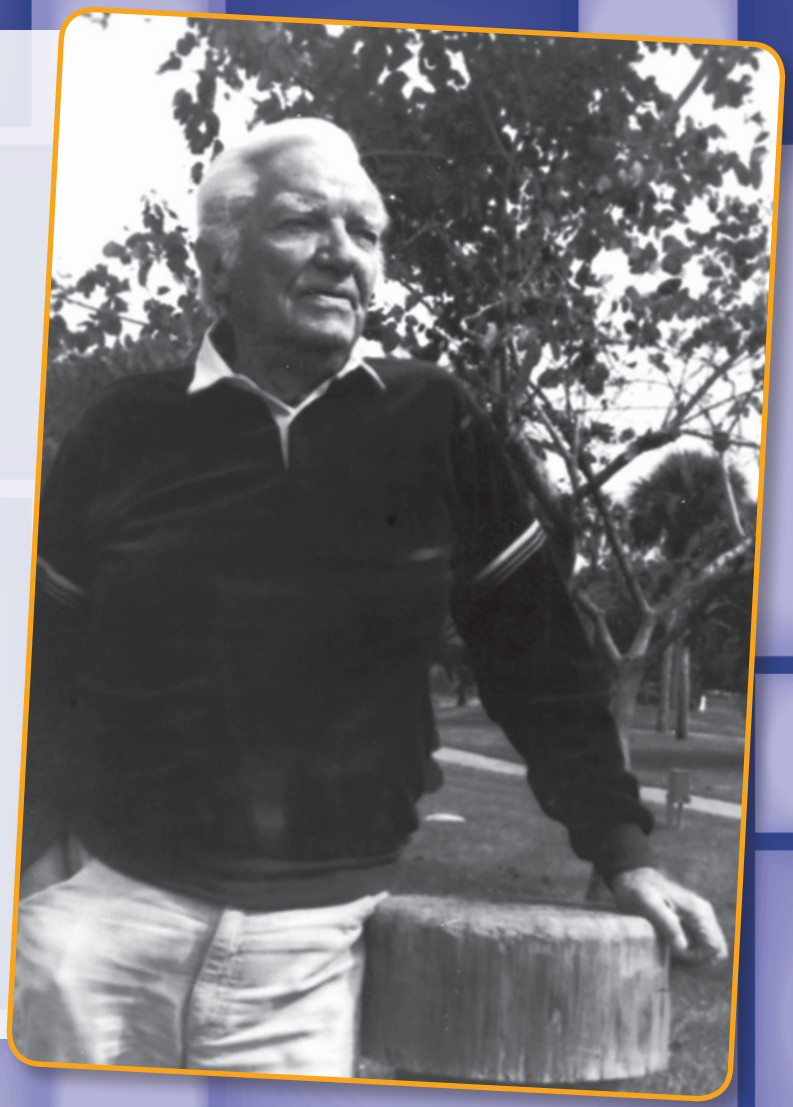
Scott O'Dell has been called one of the best authors of children's historical fiction. He is best known for writing *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. This book has sold more than 6 million copies. It has been translated into nearly 30 languages and made into a movie.

O'Dell gained special recognition for honestly telling the stories of native **cultures**. Many writers before him had told those stories only from the viewpoint of Europeans. In addition, O'Dell was among the first writers for young adults to feature strong female characters.

O'Dell did not start writing for young readers until he was in his 60s. He loved sharing stories of his native California and the Southwest. He enjoyed telling stories that showed history is not so different from modern life. His historical characters

face the same needs for love and friendship that his modern readers face. These characters have to make hard decisions about right and wrong. O'Dell also wrote about the importance of respecting nature and the **environment**.

In 1972, O'Dell received the Hans Christian Andersen Award for lifetime achievement. This award recognized his contributions to children's literature.



Born to Write

Scott O'Dell was born Odell Gabriel Scott on May 23, 1898, in Los Angeles, California. He changed his name to Scott O'Dell in the 1920s. His father, Bennett Mason Scott, was an official for the Union Pacific Railroad. His mother was May Elizabeth Gabriel Scott. O'Dell had a younger sister named Lucille.

When O'Dell was a boy, Los Angeles was different from how it is today. Then, it was more frontier than city. O'Dell said that early Los Angeles had more jackrabbits than humans and more horses than cars! He and his friends spent many hours wandering the sagebrush of Southern California. They hunted and explored.

O'Dell and his family lived in other parts of California, too. His father's job meant the family moved often, although always within the state. Once, they lived on an island in a house built on **stilts**! Such experiences influenced his writing later on.

O'Dell's heritage also affected his dreams for himself and his future. In elementary school, his parents told him that he had a famous ancestor. Novelist Sir Walter Scott was a first cousin of his great-grandmother. O'Dell decided he would also write historical fiction.

O'Dell enjoyed reading from an early age. As an adult, some of his favorite writers were Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, and Willa Cather.

California Kid

As his family moved around the state, O'Dell changed schools many times. Finally, the family settled near Long Beach, California, just south of Los Angeles. O'Dell attended Long Beach Polytechnic High School. There, the tall, slender student gained fame as a runner. He also graduated near the top of his class.

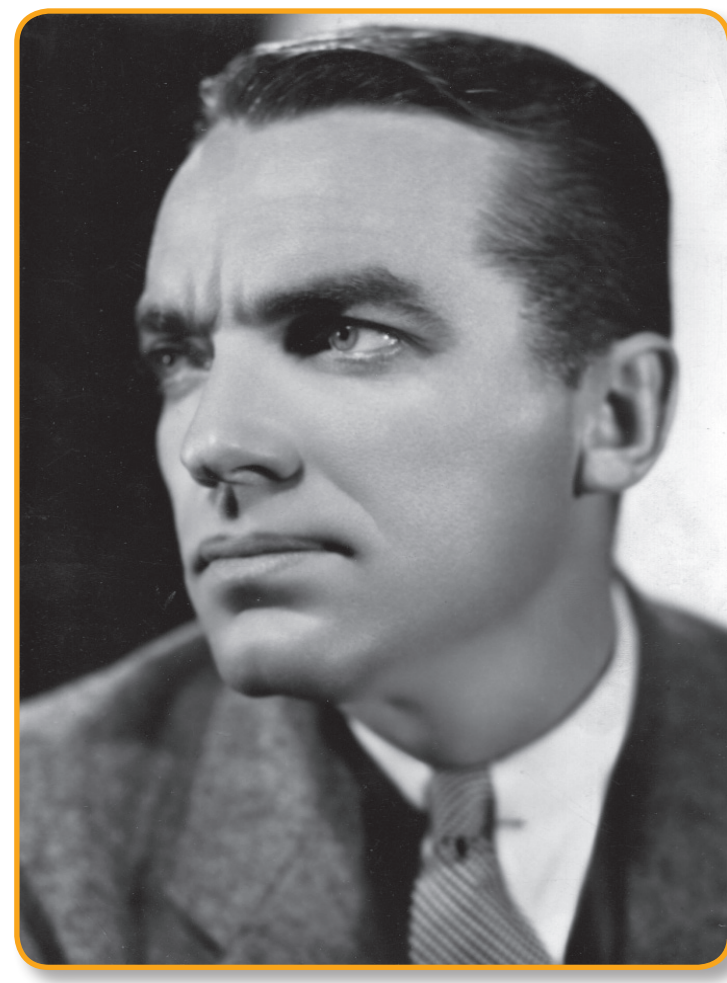
When he was 20 years old, O'Dell joined the US Army. He began officer training to serve in **World War I**. However, the war ended before he finished. After he was **discharged**, O'Dell returned to California. There, he **enrolled** at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

O'Dell soon realized his earlier school days had not challenged him very much. Before, his courses had been so easy he had not had to study. Unfortunately, that meant he had not developed good study skills.

For the next few years, O'Dell attended several colleges. He attended the University of Wisconsin and then Stanford

University back in California. He took classes that interested him instead of following a **curriculum** aimed at earning a **degree**. He studied English, history, philosophy, and psychology, among other subjects.

After Stanford, O'Dell took a job with the Palmer Photoplay Company in Hollywood, California. *Photoplay* was the term for what is now called a **screenplay**. O'Dell helped decide which photoplays would make good movies.



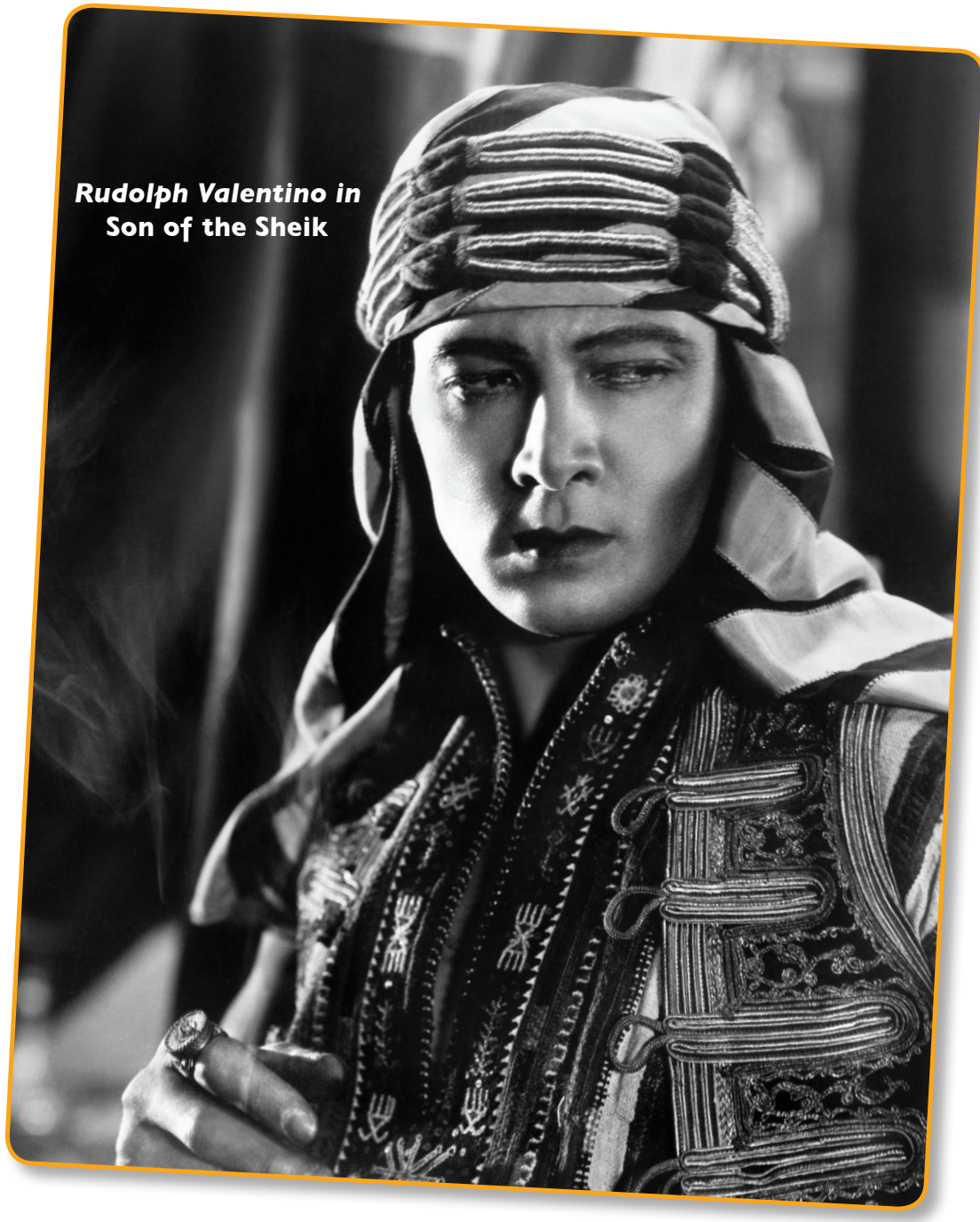
Odell changed his name to Scott O'Dell after it was typed incorrectly on an article he had written.

Hollywood

O'Dell found that he enjoyed working with movies. In the late 1920s, he left Palmer and took a job with Paramount Pictures as a set dresser. He helped arrange the objects that were on the set of a film before the shooting began.

One of the films O'Dell worked on was *Son of the Sheik*, starring silent-film legend Rudolph Valentino. During filming, the **producers** decided Valentino's fingers were too stubby for a scene where he had to hold a string of pearls. O'Dell had long, slender fingers. They decided to use his fingers in the shot instead of Valentino's.

This scene was O'Dell's only brush with acting. However, he continued to work behind the camera. He became an operator of one of Hollywood's first color cameras. He shot movies for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). At one point, the job took O'Dell to Italy to film a silent-movie version of *Ben-Hur*.



Rudolph Valentino in
Son of the Sheik

Woman of Spain was inspired by stories O'Dell heard while living in Pomona Valley in California, where his father had an orange grove. Today, California is the second-largest orange producer in the United States.

O'Dell quickly fell in love with Italy. He stayed there after filming ended. For a year, he traveled the country. O'Dell took classes at the University of Rome and lived in Florence. There, he wrote his first novel for adults, *Pinfeathers*. It was never published.

In 1927, O'Dell returned to California and began citrus farming. He also wrote another **manuscript** for adults called *Woman of Spain: A Story of Old California*.

O'Dell sold the manuscript to a publisher and also sold the movie rights to MGM. MGM paid O'Dell $24,000 for the script, which is more than $300,000 in today's dollars. MGM never made the movie. But, O'Dell had enough money from the sale to live through the **Great Depression**.

Florence, Italy, in the 1900s

A Soldier Again

On December 7, 1941, Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The act brought the United States into **World War II**. Though O'Dell was in his mid-40s, he wanted to help the war effort.

O'Dell joined the US Air Force in 1942. He helped evaluate new **recruits**. But, he didn't like this job. He asked to

be **discharged**. Then, he joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary. One of his jobs was to patrol the California coast looking for Japanese submarines.

When the war ended in 1945, O'Dell made a lot of changes. He returned to writing. By this time, he needed money again. So, he sold his citrus farm and began working as a book editor for the *Los Angeles Daily News*. He also wrote another book for adults, *Hill of the Hawk*. It was published in 1947. In 1948, he married Jane Rattenbury.

For the next ten years, O'Dell focused on writing historical fiction for adults. He had moderate success and published several more books. One of those books is *Man Alone*. O'Dell wrote it in cooperation with William Doyle, who was in prison for murder. Other books told stories related to the history of California.

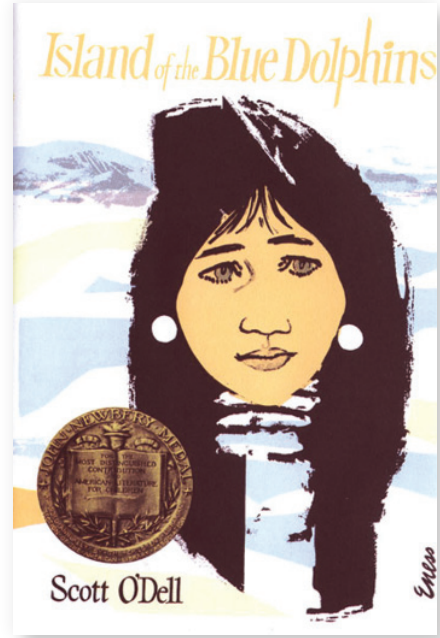
O'Dell in his Air Force uniform in 1943

Inspiration

O'Dell was finally making a living as a writer. He had enough money to buy a house in an apple orchard east of San Diego, California. It was near one of the places he had lived as a boy.

However, O'Dell soon became concerned. He learned the local mountains had become a popular place for hunters. The hunters seemed to be killing the local wild animals just for fun.

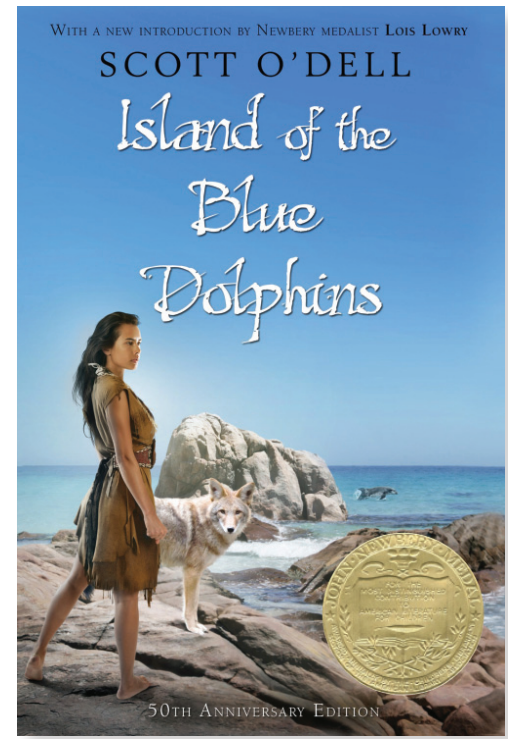
O'Dell had hunted as a young boy. He had also killed for fun, not for food. But he was ashamed of that. He thought about writing a letter to the editor of the local newspaper to



The original 1960 cover

complain about the hunters. Yet O'Dell realized even if people read the letter, they probably would forget it quickly. He needed to win hearts to change minds. He needed a story.

O'Dell was inspired by something he had heard long before. In the 1920s, he had read an article about a Native American woman who had lived alone on an island for 18 years. She was known as the Lone Woman of San Nicolas.


With a new introduction by Newbery medalist Lois Lowry
SCOTT O'DELL
Island of the Blue Dolphins
50th Anniversary Edition

The 50th anniversary cover

O'Dell took the idea and created Karana, a young Native American woman stranded on an island off the California coast. In his story, Karana must learn to feed and take care of herself in the wild. She also learns the value of living in harmony with wildlife and the **environment**. This story became *Island of the Blue Dolphins.*

Lost in the Story

Island of the Blue Dolphins was published in 1960. It went on to become one of the best-selling books ever written for young adults. It won the 1961 **Newbery Medal** from the **American Library Association (ALA)**.

The book also made O'Dell a famous writer and a popular speaker at schools. By 1963, he estimated that he had talked to more than 40,000 schoolchildren.

The success of the book introduced O'Dell to the joys of writing for young readers. He thought young readers were better able to get lost in a story than adults. He decided from that point he would write only for children.

O'Dell published *The King's Fifth* in 1966 and *The Black Pearl* in 1967. The ALA named both books Newbery Honor Books. *The Black Pearl* was also made into a movie in 1976.

O’Dell’s personal life also took a turn in the mid-1960s. He and his wife Jane divorced. While on a book tour, O’Dell met a librarian named Elizabeth Hall. The two eventually married. O’Dell became a stepfather to Elizabeth’s children, Susan Andersen and David Mason.

O’Dell and Elizabeth Hall

Final Thunder

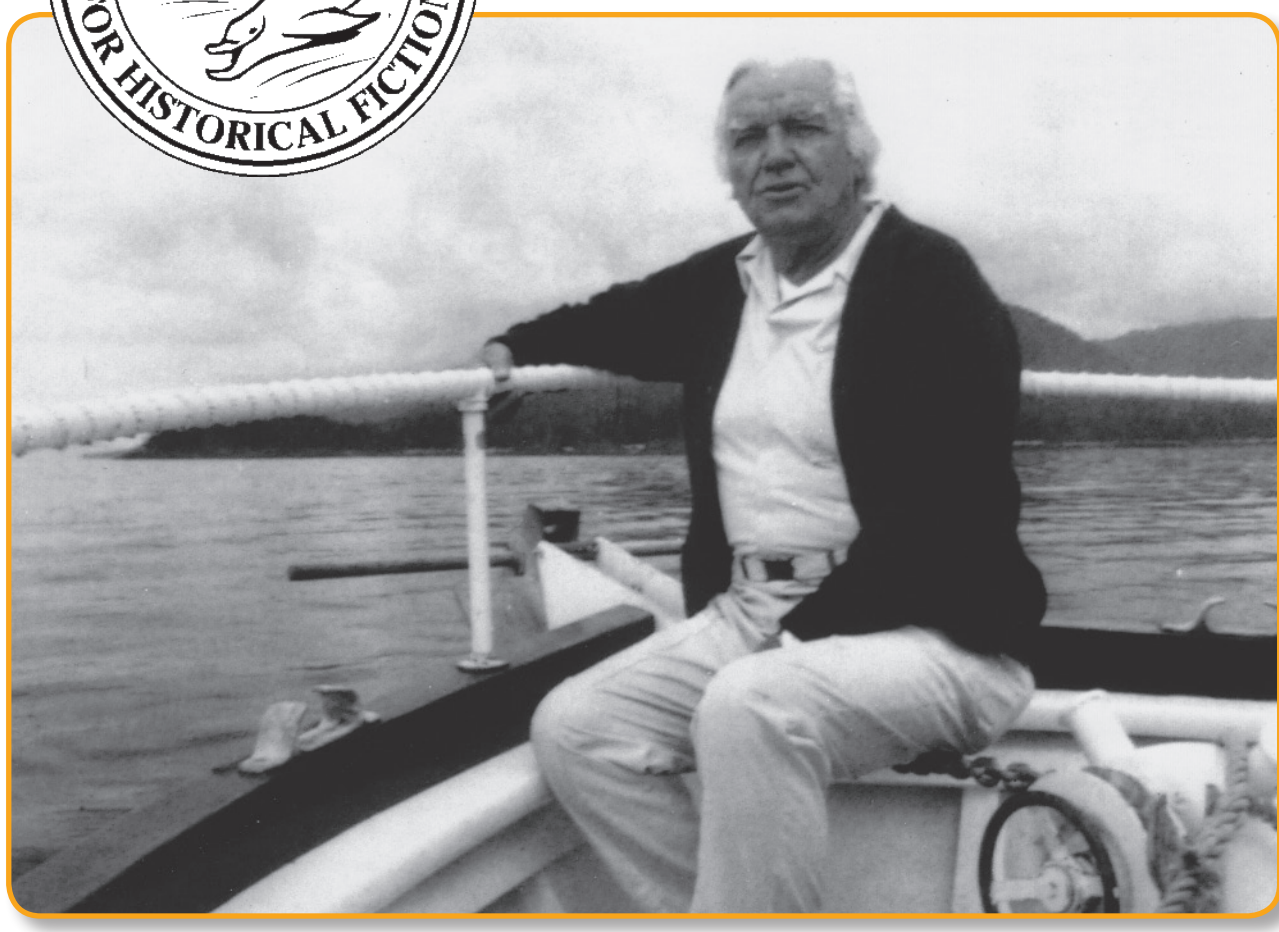
O'Dell's next most famous book was published in 1970. *Sing Down the Moon* is based on the Long Walk. In 1864, US soldiers forced the Navajo to walk from their reservation in Arizona to a new home in eastern New Mexico. *Sing Down the Moon* was named a **Newbery Honor Book** in 1971.

O'Dell left his beloved California in 1975 when he and Elizabeth moved to New York. He continued to write on a variety of topics. *Kathleen, Please Come Home* addresses the issue of runaways. *Child of Fire* talks about gang wars. O'Dell also wrote about clashes between native populations and European conquerors.

O'Dell continued to write until his death from **cancer** on October 15, 1989. Before he died, he asked Elizabeth to finish the **manuscript** he was working on at the time. She did, and *Thunder Rolling in the Mountains* was published after his death.

O'Dell's legacy lives on with the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. The award provides a $5,000 prize each year

to the book chosen as the year's best historical novel for young readers. Today, readers continue to relate to the strong, timeless themes of Scott O'Dell's novels.



O'Dell's family scattered his ashes in the Pacific Ocean. As the boat headed home, dolphins escorted it back toward the shore!

Glossary

American Library Association (ALA) - an organization whose goal is to promote library and information services.

cancer - any of a group of often deadly diseases marked by harmful changes in the normal growth of cells. Cancer can spread and destroy healthy tissues and organs.

culture - the customs, arts, and tools of a nation or a people at a certain time. Something related to culture is cultural.

curriculum - the subjects that make up a course of study in a school or college.

degree - a title given by a college to its students for completing their studies.

discharge - to release from military service.

enroll - to register, especially in order to attend a school.

environment - all the surroundings that affect the growth and well-being of a living thing.

Great Depression - the period from 1929 to 1942 of worldwide economic trouble. There was little buying or selling, and many people could not find work.

manuscript - a handwritten or typed book or article not yet published.

Newbery Medal - an annual award given by the American Library Association. It honors the author of the best American children's book published in the previous year. A Newbery Honor Book is a runner-up to the Newbery Medal.

producer - a person who oversees or provides money for a play, television show, movie, or album.
recruit - to get someone to join a group. A person who is recruited is called a recruit.
screenplay - the written form of a story prepared for a movie.
stilt - one of several poles that are used to hold a building up above water or the ground.
World War I - from 1914 to 1918, fought in Europe. Great Britain, France, Russia, the United States, and their allies were on one side. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and their allies were on the other side.
World War II - from 1939 to 1945, fought in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Great Britain, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, and their allies were on one side. Germany, Italy, Japan, and their allies were on the other side.

Websites

To learn more about Children's Authors, visit **booklinks.abdopublishing.com**. These links are routinely monitored and updated to provide the most current information available.

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